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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of friendship that is displayed by an 8-year-old homeless immigrant Taiwanese-Chinese child. Through the use of interviews with the child as well as observations, the author attempts to interpret the child's understanding of friendship according to the theories of cognitive, emotional, and moral development of Piaget, Gilligan, Elkin, Fraiberg, and others. The study attempts to see how well theory could be used to explain individual behavior and thinking, and to challenge the theory if it was perceived to be an ill fit for this child because of cultural dissonance provided by poverty or race. The author concludes that the theories were of help in getting some perspective on the development of this child. In the course of doing the interviews, the researcher admits to being struck by how poignant and beautiful the child's reflections on friendship are and her potential of attaining the model of friendship that she creates in her mind if circumstances with her peers permit her to relinquish her role as outcast. The appendix contains a brief description of the first encounter with the subject and her family in the shelter in which they lived. (GLR)

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Aspects of Emotional and Cognitive Development in Middle Childhood

Subject: age Eight, Homeless, Taiwanese Immigrant

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In this paper I will examine the understanding of the concept of friendship displayed by an eight year old homeless immigrant child named Teresa ~~ma~~. Using my interview with her on this subject and many previous observations of this child, I will attempt to interpret her understanding of friendship according to the theories cognitive, emotional and moral development of Piaget, Gilligan, Elkin, Fraiberg and others. The purpose will be to see how well I can use theory to explain individual behavior and thinking, and to challenge theory if I perceive an ill fit for this child due to cultural dissonance provoked by poverty or race.

Appendix 1 is a brief description of my first encounter with Teresa and her family in the shelter in which they live. It is in this context that the life of the family has unfolded for the past 9 months. Teresa lives in one room with her mother, brother and sister. The only recreational space is the lounge I describe. Privacy is nonexistent under the circumstances. The Child Welfare Agency has an open and active file regarding this family, and there is much anxiety on the part of the mother that her children will be taken away. A woman on the run from an abusive husband, and going to school full time, she is under intense scrutiny by all social agencies in the shelter system for signs of neglecting or abusing her children. The upshot of this pressure is an intense anxiety on the part of the mother, frequently verbalized in front of the children. Compounding the dilemma of survival are language and cultural differences that further isolate this family from other residents of the shelter, and from the administration. Additionally, the children compete for precious attention from this exhausted and troubled woman by almost literally climbing the walls.

It is against this backdrop that Teresa is defining her identity through the social agencies of school, peers and family¹.

According to Piaget, a child of seven or eight years should have attained the level of cognitive development characterized at concrete operations. "The decentering of cognitive constructions necessary for the development of operations is inseparable from the decentering of affective and social constructions. But the term "social" must not be thought of in the narrow sense of educational, cultural, or moral transmission alone: rather, it covers an

¹Elkin, F. and Handel, G. (1989). The Child and Society. New York: Random House. Chapter 5, p. 142

interpersonal process of socialization which is at once cognitive, affective, and moral."² At around the age of seven, according to Piaget, the child's new schema for interactional learning from adults and peers combined with the ability to entertain perspectives other than its own, and to generalize hypotheses of causality and rule bound behavior leads the child to a new level of autonomous functioning. Friendships may be founded now on mutual respect, reciprocity and cooperation.³ It is into these new schemas of self reflection promoted by a new capacity to use memory to evaluate experience with an increased ability to engage in independent action that organized beliefs about the self become crystallized.⁴

In terms of theories governing moral development and the characteristics of friendship, Kohlberg hypothesizes stages of development that complement Piaget's theories of cognitive operational thinking. In middle childhood, at the time of transition to concrete operations, he assumes that perspective taking enables children at around age seven or eight to adopt the belief in the "golden rule" of mutuality that he bases on the ability of a child to think logically and to hypothesize in the abstract what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes.⁵ Extending this theory a little further, Selman believes that there are stages of development in friendship that correspond to concrete operations characterized by "fair weather friendship" in which cooperation promotes and arguments destroy the affective bonds between children.⁶

Now, in asking questions of Teresa about her friendships, it became clear that she has very few, if any, close and sustaining friendships with peers. I felt this might be so when I asked her what friends were and she answered that her friends hit her and stood by her even in second grade when she was 8 or 6. (See page one of the transcript.) She immediately changed the subject to begin talking about my computer, a strategy she uses time and again in this interview when her emotions are about to become intensely painful.

²Piaget, J. and Inhelder, B. (1969) The Psychology of the Child. New York: Basic Books. Chapter 4, p. 95

³Ibid. p127

⁴Singer and Singer. (1990). When imaginative play goes underground: Fantasy in middle childhood. In: The house of Make-Believe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, p. 238.

⁵Cole & Cole. (1989). The Development of Children. New York: Scientific American Books. Chapter 15, p. 486.

⁶Ibid. p. 495.

She has been taught never to cry, and crying is not permitted in her family. Crying is punished with hitting. When I asked her about that early on in our work together, she stated that her grandmother would not allow crying, and that it is her duty to hold tears in. There is a cultural basis for this belief about not showing tears - it invites bad luck. I asked her what she did when she really needs to cry, and she said "Just don't, that's all." This, and the extraordinary conflict between her needs as a growing child and her duties as the eldest sibling in a family that needs her cooperation to survive may explain why she laughs whenever we touch on something painful in this interview. She may be consciously deflecting pain, or as Fraiberg so eloquently describes in Ghosts in the Nursery, the suppression of affect may indicate identification with the aggressor⁷, in this case her mother who becomes "a screaming-crying monster" in many of Teresa's drawings. Margaret ~~MA~~ hits her children when she gets overwhelmed, and there is no way to predict when that will be. She punished her 22 month old baby when the child dirtied itself. In Chinese culture, the mother is supposed to anticipate the baby's need to defecate and get it to a toilet in time. Teresa is very responsible for the baby's care, and when the mother lost control and hit her sister, Teresa felt rage, anxiety and guilt that came out during a reading session with me around Halloween. She spent part of that night scolding herself as she drew and "humiliating" a character in one of the books we were reading for ugliness. She also spent part of that session calling yellow things ugly and Chinese things ugly. The voice she used was not her own, but was shrill, harsh and relentless. It may have been her mother's voice.⁸

In further investigating Teresa's peer relations, I went to her after-school program, where I do storytelling and literacy activities, and studied her in the lunchroom. She sat completely alone, her teacher speaking to her without looking at her, and in a harsh voice. The girl seemed disconnected from her surroundings and was staring into space while the other children congregated at the opposite side of her table, talking and laughing. The teacher had decided that Teresa was not to participate in my workshop for children because she "already knew me and it wouldn't be fair." Upon insisting that

⁷Fraiberg, S. Adelson, and Shapiro (19). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. p. 191.

⁸Fraiberg, S., Adelson, and Shapiro (19). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. p. 192.

the girl be allowed to participate, I brought Teresa into my classroom and introduced her to the other children as a friend of mine. They were surprised, "You know her?" Again, in talking to some of the more popular girls in class, I discovered that Teresa "gets picked on," and the child I questioned, Jasmin, whom Teresa names as a friend in her interview, stated that she did not like or dislike Teresa. She wished her no harm, but did not want to be friends with her for fear of losing the friendship of the other girls.

Yet, in spite of this, Teresa shows an ability to imagine ideal friendship through play, acting, and fantasy. She expresses this in her narrative on pages two and three of the transcript. Teresa imagines herself crying and then imagines a friend who tries to make her laugh. She fills this mental picture with images of mutuality: sharing food, protecting each other, helping with spelling, having a cheerful face when you see one another, no hitting. Teresa is imagining not only what she needs to be given and doesn't have, but a friendship in which she can give love - based on the feminine ideal of care delineated by Gilligan. She measures the worth of her dreamed-of friendship using the standard of connection, communication and relatedness.⁹

Teresa is doing the work of middle childhood almost without help. In my experience of working with homeless children over the last four years, I am always astonished by how well and quickly the children take to acting as a means of expression. I use this as a tool to promote literacy in its broadest sense. The children use it to have experiences that they can't get any other way. The human instrument is endowed with hope, down to its very synapses. "Fantasy not only leads to the permanent discovery of new relations (but) also creates the experience of values, because every connotation which has been imagined transcends in its value the object to which it is related."¹⁰ Thus, Teresa is determined to grow even without soil and her imagination permits her to feel joy and to temporarily drop her loneliness. It is the manifestation of hope, so readily available to these children under duress that convinces me that we are cognitively designed to hope. "This hope sustains us in

⁹Gilligan, C. (1982). In a Different Voice: Images of Relationship. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press. Chapter 2, p. 35

¹⁰Singer and Singer. (1990) When Imaginative Play Goes Underground: Fantasy in Middle Childhood. In: The House of Make-Believe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press. p. 238.

defeat, illness, and frustration so that we keep trying and often succeed in creating new realities."¹¹

Yet, her experience is not one of blind hope. Teresa, in speculating on the parameters of love acknowledges that love is mutable. On page four of the transcript, she speaks about the varying hierarchies of love for friends and family. She says that love for friends can dissolve over a fight, and that even family bonds of love may not be permanent. On the surface, her ideas support Selman's definition of a stage of thinking about friendship in which love is a "fair weather" affair. Yet, how can we fault her observations of her world, which is the world at large for many people? How can we say that her perception is relative to her attainment of concrete operations, and that it will change again once she attains formal operations? What she observes is frequently the reality of love in our society.

The subtlety of her analysis defies the abstract logic of Kohlberg and the Selman's conviction that friends at a certain age are interchangeable. With the ability to network perception into a web of relationships, Teresa describes her parents breakup as the failure of love to overcome violence. She wishes that her parents would start over and not hit each other. She does not assign blame to one parent or another, nor does she assume that the violence was justified. She never states that there is no love between her parents, just not enough. This requires some very sophisticated perspective taking, and an ability to reason outward from her observations of her parents to create a view of what holds people together which is remarkably subtle. Then, in extrapolating her observations into a vision of friendship among peers, she imagines it as mutuality without interference from rage. In her feminine way of narrating an imaginary solution to the blighted relationship between her parents, she creates a vision in which, for her, violence is not carried over into her friendships, and not passed on. She has used fantasy to allow her to experience emotions she has no way of experiencing yet in life. So, she prevents an identification with this aspect of her mother¹² and is very clear about her dislike of her mother's tendency to hit the children. She accomplishes this through fantasy.

¹¹Singer and Singer. (1990) When Imaginative Play Goes Underground: Fantasy in Middle Childhood. In: The House of Make Believe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press. p. 264.

¹²Fraiberg, S. Aelson, and Shapiro, V. (19). Ghosts in the Nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relations. p. 193.

From the ages of seven to thirteen the child enters a period of accelerated growth and differentiation in fantasy capacities and the most critical period in which self-awareness, beliefs about self and others, and a host of wishes begins to crystallize.¹³

As in all of my work with this child, it is apparent that Teresa uses every scrap of attention I can give her, every book we read, everything she sees to attempt to fulfill her need to grow. She identifies strongly with every heroine in every fairy tale we study, and I choose them for that purpose. She is trying to construct her place in the world and come to a positive self-identity with very little real help. The struggle is great between what she would like to be and who she is afraid she is as defined by family, school, peer relations and her status as an immigrant in a strange culture.

Maxine Hong Kingston writes of the experience of being the first generation of her family raised in America. "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness--a shame--still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say "hello" casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open. During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten. I enjoyed the silence. At first it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk or to pass kindergarten. It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. "Louder," said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl."¹⁴

¹³Singer and Singer. (1990). When imaginative play goes underground: Fantasy in middle childhood. In: The House of Make-Believe. Cambridge, MA; Harvard U. Press, p. 234.

¹⁴Kingston, Maxine H. (1975). The Woman Warrior. New York: Random House, pp. 165-166.

The children at school belittle Teresa's racial and cultural differences. Her manner of speaking English is a unique combination of syntactic transpositions from Chinese, and black urban heritage-English (Delpit 1990). She is completely bilingual, and shows a superb mastery of English in that she can use it for humor. Word games and puns delight her. But without a secure foothold in our culture, she is simultaneously cut off from support from the Chinese community by virtue of her minority status within it as a Taiwanese. In addition, her mother's flight from her husband has effectively cut the family off from aid from any extended family of the father's relatives. This is not an unusual phenomenon in families where domestic violence is the norm and in which all are involved in complicit silence and denial. How much more poignant though, when the first step toward freedom results in isolation so complete and so layered with cultural as well as personal loss.

It is against this backdrop that I have observed Teresa misread or ignore overtures of friendship from children in her afterschool program. The child Jasmin, whom Teresa counts as a friend, tried to say goodbye to her several times during our last session at P.S. 17, but Teresa never acknowledged her or answered her "Good-bye!" Jasmin said to me, "You see? She's kind of crazy or something."

I saw Teresa (after several months of work with me and her reading teacher) sit with two girls in the reading corner and supply every single word to the girls that they could not figure out in a story they were looking at (which brought me a great degree of satisfaction because it was not only great reading but a new, more confident way of relating to her peers). Yet, on other occasions, I have seen Teresa withdraw in the middle of such activity and wander around like a little ghost, reinforcing Jasmin's and the group's definition of Teresa as a loser. She will often display this behavior when I am busy with another child in the group. But she used to display this kind of withdrawal in private sessions with me, and no longer does, so I am hoping that the distance I take from her in the group will lead her toward stronger identification with her peers and less with me.

To conclude, I have been enormously helped by the theories we have studied in getting some perspective on the development of this troubled child. I appreciate the cognitive theories of Piaget for setting the stage as to what we may expect a child to assimilate social rules and conceive of justice. The stage theories of Kohlberg, Damon and Selman seem overly abstract to describe female ways of

knowing things, and do not address the depth of feeling we attach to friendship at a very early age. I have to rebel against the notion of fair-weather friendship because I think many people are aware of the unique nature of the people we love. No one is replaceable. It is cavalier and disrespectful to conjecture otherwise about children's attachments just because they may not have the words to describe their feelings in a way that researchers find easy to measure. I have seen grown men cry describing the death of a pet dog when they were four years old. I think that adults put distance between themselves and memories of helplessness or heartache in childhood, and that may make it harder for grownups to remember what childhood friendships and losses feel like. The last thing one would want to do is invalidate a child's feelings about a friend after a fight by saying, "Get over it. They don't matter any way," as the tortured family in the Fraiberg study of "Jane" did. Gilligan's model of female relatedness feels more intuitively right and sufficiently complex to address the nuances of moral development.

Middle childhood would seem to be an enormously dramatic time of finding a place in the world and in the family, and developing a sense of ability and autonomy.¹⁵ In trying to work with Teresa on her reading, I have used Erikson, Fraiberg, Delpit, Gilligan and Piaget to help me try to locate this child on some kind of map of emotional-cognitive-social development in order to choose activities that would best serve her purpose of finding a "home" in all senses of the word. This has permitted me a small measure of detachment that I would not have been able to achieve otherwise, and which would have impaired my ability to see so much pain and still work effectively. What I find most hopeful is that Teresa seems to be developing on a par with her peers in spite of the emotional problems she has that come from so many external forces.

Children's capacity to love deeply and to express joy in life astounds me. I find Teresa's reflections on friendship poignant and beautiful although I may not have asked enough questions to demonstrate that in the interview itself. In her world nothing is permanent, but in her imagination, she constructs a simple model of friendship that she may attain if circumstances with her peers permit her to relinquish her role as outcast. Meanwhile, I see the beauty in her spirit and I bear witness to it. I hope that somehow, it will live on.

¹⁵Erikson, E. (1950). Childhood and Society. New York: W. W. Norton, p. 259.

Summary:

The child I interviewed is Teresa Ma, age eight year, homeless. She lives in the Alexander Abraham residence on 51st street. We have known each other since September, and I tutor her every week for my reading class practicum. I love her and she trusts me. I feel a little badly about prying into her affairs at the end of this conversation because I feel I should respect her privacy. She doesn't know how I am going to use this information. She told me about the way her mother disciplines her siblings and herself, and I got scared for her and scared her into thinking, through my questions, that I had betrayed her mother. In fact, I did tell social services in the shelter, because Margaret is at the end of her rope. The pressures seem lessened now, even though Margaret asked me pointedly how much more of her daughter's time I need. So I needed to try to tread lightly, and Teresa demanded a copy of my raw notes to show her mother. I gave it over and wrote a note explaining why I had asked Teresa personal questions for this observation. I asked Margaret to call me if she felt there were anything in this that she would not like seen.

Situation of the evening:

After a reading session, we have eaten chocolate and written a story together. She is dressed tonight in a pink skirt, white blouse with pajama tops underneath for warmth. Pink high top sneakers and a blue head band. She is sitting on my lap contemplating the computer screen while I type what she says, as I record. Too bad I didn't just record to save the problem of hard copy ending up with Margaret.

After reviewing some topic choiced and asking Teresa to let me interview her, we settle on the topic of friends. She rejects family, boys and girls and rules and discipline.

I ask her to define friends and she says that hers hit her. She immediately digresses to speak about the computer. I draw her back to the conversation asking who her best friend is. She can't name one but gives the qualities of friendship that she most seeks - spelling help, safety, good cheer, food, no hitting. She names three girls at school who are her friends. When asked if a friend had to look a certain way she said no, that it wasn't important, though a true friend should not stink. Friends should not be alone, and not be scared so they can help each other. She digresses to the computer again. I ask her if she loves friends as much as family. She says no, because you don't live with friends and someday they could turn on you. I ask if family ever betray you, and she said not that much, only they hit once in a while. I asked if one could stop loving family and she said that her mother left her father and she did not know why. She then put her attention back on the computer. I asked her what it meant if family sometimes goes away. She said that it meant that they don't love each other that much and tht her mother and father should start over only no hitting this time.

After this she refused to talk and said, "Finished. Finished."

My assignment for this paper is to talk to a child...

Talk to a child?

About some special stuff to see what the child, that's you, thinks.

That's it?

Yup. My teacher just wants to know what a real child thinks. (she laughs) You. You're a real child. O.k. we have to find a special topic to talk about and I thought of a couple. Do you want to sit on a chair or you want to sit on my lap? '

On your lap.

What you doing, putting the chocolate away? O.K. go ahead. O.K., here's what we have to think about. I have to ask questions so I thought of some things but I didn't know which topic you might like to talk about so I wrote some down. We could talk about friends, or we could talk about boys and girls, how they're different. We could talk about rule...rules and discipline and stuff like that or we could talk about family stuff or sex or we could talk about oh, almost anything. How do you like the idea of talking about rules?

No.

Great. O.K.

Friends.

Great. O.K. what do you think friends are?

Friends are nice. And I got some nice...I got somefriends. (I am typing at the computer while she speaks and she begins to dictate and wait for me to catch up to her responses) My friends hit me and stand by me even in second grade when I was 8 or 6. (She is in second grade now.) No. Everybody in class have to get a computer?

No, but a lot of people have them, you know typewriters. O.K. let me ask you some more questions. How do you know if somebody is your friend?

You mean my best friend?

Yeah, how do you know someone is your best friend?

Because they are good to me.

What do they do?

When I cry they help me. Try to make me, try to make me don't cry, laugh. (she laughs)

Oh, that sounds like a good friend. What else do they do?

And they help me if somebody hits me.

What do they do? How do they help you.

If somebody bother me so they tell teacher or tell the principle or his teacher or his mother.

Oh that sounds good. Who is your best friend?

Mmmm. Mmmm.

Boy or a girl?

Girl.

Girl. What's her name?

Jasmin.

Jasmin is one of them. Who else?

Rachel.

Rachel.

Ummm. Ariel the mermaid.

Ariel the Mermaid?

(laughs)

She's a friend of yours?

Not the mermaid. I'm saying she's got the name.

Oh, she's got a name like the mermaid.

Yeah.

I thought you meant you have, like a pretend friend. O.k. so Jasmin, Rachel, the mermaid, but not really. (she laughs) Who are your really best friends. (she laughs)

I don't know.

Well, if, what say, if you said, "Oh yah, this is my best friend." What would she be like? What's the very best friend supposed to be like?

Helping each other. If somebody don't know how to spell, they spellfor you or play with each other and not hitting. (laughs)

Yeah.

And share food with each other and don't fight.

Oh, that's nice. This is nice. Do they have to look any special way?

Yes.

How?

Hmmm. Like umm, they're cheerful to see each other, play each other and no hitting.

No hitting, right?

Right.

And no fighting at all and say they lost a pencil, they just give them one and share pencil if they don't got no pencil and just get it at home and give it back. What is this, D?

euuuu!

That's nice, and what else do they have to be short or tall?

Mmm, doesn't matter.

Do they have to be pretty?

It doesn't matter. Does not stink, that's it. (laughs) (I laugh)

So true. (I laugh) But what if they did stink, what would you do?

Mmm. Go away. andand...

What would you do?

I just forgot.

Give em a bath?

(laughs) No.

So long, kid, I'll write you a letter.

And say, "You stink." (Laughs)

You stink/

You could do four. Yeah, Teacher, me, you and then that, heh-heh.

Let's see. What are some of the great things about friends? Is it always fun to be with friends?

Yes. Because they could play each otehr and don't be alone, and they don't be scared and so they could help each other. What does this mean?

Oh that. If you click there it goes a whole page forward if you click there it goes a whole page back. It tells you where , the arrows go the same way, but if you click

in the gray spot it goes a whole page at a time. You see? Ding. Ding. Ding. I'm back where I was before. O.K. so like for instance do you love your friend as much as your brother or sister or your other family?

Mmmm not that much.

Not that much. How come?

Hmmm because we don't live together and we don't know where is something and maybe someday even though we're best best friends...

...best friends. What might happen?

They might - if we play wrestle, we all going to start to fight.

What about family?

Our family don't do not, hit that much only that our mother only if we be bad.
(laughs)

With family you never stop loving them, do you. Well, do you? Sometimes.

One of these days my mother went away from my father. Went away from my father and I don't know why.

It's hard not to know why.

Howcome the screen moves up over there.

Well cause the screen is smaller than a piece of paper.

All of this is page two again.

Eventually, yeah, you'll see it switch over.

We can be long?

We can write as much as we want to. Teresa, if family sometimes goes away, what does that mean?

They don't love each other, ...that much.

Uh-huh.

I think they should start all over. And my father don't hit my mother. She told me that.

She told you that?

Finished.

Your mommy told you that and that's why she left?

Finished.